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UNCLAS MUSCAT 000863

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: CAMEL RACING TRANSFERRED TO MINISTRY OF SPORTS

REF: MUSCAT 607

1. (U) In an unexpected move May 24, authority over Oman's Camel and Equestrian Association (OCEA) was transferred by royal directive to the Ministry of Sports Affairs (MSA). Addressing camel owners at the association's new premises outside of Barka, royal family member Sayyid Asa'ad bin Tariq al-Said, long-serving president of the OCEA, said that under the mandate of the MSA, camel racing in Oman will enjoy greater international sporting recognition. Moreover, as the official regulatory body responsible for racing in the Sultanate, the MSA will not only monitor OCEA compliance with national and international laws, it will ultimately serve to ensure the integrity of racing in the Sultanate. A new chairman for the reassigned association will be chosen by royal directive, while twelve other members will be elected to its board for four-year terms. An interim committee has been appointed to oversee the association's activities until a full board can be elected.

2. (SBU) COMMENT: While not specifically enunciated by Sayyid Asa'ad, with this move the Omani government appears to be seeking to bring camel racing into a formal regulatory environment. With the government having argued all along that camel racing was a traditional practice best left out of its regulatory hands, it remains to be seen how this step will be received by the local Bedouin tribes. It is also unclear whether Sayyid Asa'ad willingly surrendered his portfolio as OCEA president, or had it taken from him. The good news is that the MSA is run by a dynamic and well-regarded minister, Ali al-Sunaidi, with whom we enjoy good relations. Whatever further regulations the government may place on camel racing, the MSA should be in a better position than OCEA to ensure their implementation.
STEWART